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SUBJECT: ICRC PONDERERS BROADENING ITS ROLE IN DPRK

Classified By: Political Counselor Michael Klecheski. Reasons: 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Officials of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) told us of their interest in expanding their work in North Korea. ICRC efforts are currently limited to medical assistance, but it hopes that progress in the Six-Party Talks might create the conditions to increase its role. It is particularly interested in an expanded role on family reunion and detainees, while recognizing the difficulties in dealing with these politically charged issues. ICRC's president will visit Beijing in December and may raise his organization's hopes with Chinese officials.
END SUMMARY.

ICRC'S LIMITED ROLE -----

¶2. (C) We met November 2 with Edith Baeriswyl, ICRC Head of Operations for East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and her deputy, Daniel Fasnacht, at their request. The ICRC has a staff of six expats in North Korea, whose efforts are currently limited to two centers providing medical assistance, primarily regarding artificial limbs for North Korean amputees. Those centers are run in cooperation with the DPRK Defense and Health Ministries as well as the North Korean national Red Cross organization.

¶3. (C) Baeriswyl said that while the North Koreans are pleased with the ICRC's medical assistance, they have firmly rebuffed the organization's efforts to expand the focus of its work. This has led some in the organization to consider closing its centers out of frustration. That option has been rejected for the moment, and the ICRC is even planning a modest mission to train North Korean medical personnel on surgical methods for prosthetics, which will be particularly important given that many amputations were done poorly, making it difficult to fit artificial limbs.

LOOKING TO EXPAND -----

¶4. (C) Noting progress in the Six-Party Talks, our interlocutors expressed hope that an improved political atmosphere might create the conditions for a greater ICRC role in the DPRK. Seeing family reunification as one key area, the organization hopes it might offer creative ideas for facilitating the process. The ICRC sees detention as an even higher priority, and although it recognizes that the short-term prospects are bleak, it believes that new opportunities might result, over time, if the Six-Party Talks continue to bear fruit.

¶5. (C) Baeriswyl said such expansion is impossible without cooperation from key players in the Six-Party Talks, and wanted to inform the US of its thinking. China is also

pivotal, she noted. The ICRC role in securing the release in April of seven Chinese hostages in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia created some goodwill in Beijing. In Geneva, the ICRC has improved its contact with the Chinese Mission, dealing with it more regularly on DPRK and Burma as well as other issues. The arrival in Geneva of a new Chinese ambassador, Li Baodong, who is more forward-looking than his predecessor, has helped encourage that more positive dialogue, Baeriswyl argued. The ICRC President will travel to Beijing in early December and is considering soliciting Chinese support for the organization's expanded activity in the DPRK.

¶6. (SBU) Our interlocutors said they would welcome continued exchange of information with our mission regarding the DPRK, and noted that its Beijing office might contact the US Embassy there on the subject as well. We are prepared to convey any reaction or information to its headquarters here. TICHENOR